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NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

Technical session

Addendum

Managing drought: the Indian experience

Summary of presentation by Mr. R.G.A. Jain (India)

1. India receives 74 per cent of its annual aggregate precipitation of 400 million hectare metres during the south west monsoon (June-September). Due to erratic behaviour of the monsoon, in both low (less than 750 mm) and medium (750-1,125 mm) rainfall, regions constituting 68 per cent of the total sown area of about 141 million hectares are vulnerable to drought.

2. Drought response mechanisms in India have evolved over time. The concerns of public intervention policies have evolved from minimizing starvation deaths (Famine Code, 1880) or preventing starvation deaths (Scarcity Manuals, 1950s) to ensuring physical and economic access to food through employment generation and public distribution systems during droughts in the 1960s and 1970s.

3. The drought of 1987 represents a watershed in the evolution of responses to drought. It underlined the unsustainability of managing droughts through transfer of resources and led to the appreciation of the need for dovetailing development strategies to the resources endowment of drought-prone areas in the country.

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4. The 1987 drought, which had an overall rainfall deficiency of 19 per cent, affected 50.6 million hectares of the crop area with a population of 285 million in 263 districts in 15 states. The Union Government earmarked Rs 14.7 billion for combating the national challenge posed by one of the worst droughts of this century. The strategy included careful husbanding of water resources, contingency crop planning, livestock management, generation of 1.2 billion mandays through off-farm employment programmes and delivery of 21 million tons of foodgrains through the public distribution system to ensure the food and nutritional security of the affected population. The success of drought management in 1987 was reflected in the reduced drought impact on various economic parameters such as foodgrains production (-3.5 per cent), industrial production (+7.5 per cent), inflation rate (10.4 per cent) and also the sharper economic recovery after the drought was over. In contrast to a previous major drought (1965-1966), the bulk of drought expenditure in 1987 was on development programmes (94 per cent) aimed at imparting greater resilience through drought proofing in the vulnerable areas.

5. Several development programmes which evolved from the 1987 drought initiatives now constitute major planks of India's drought mitigation strategy. These include the National Watershed Development Programme for Rainfed Areas, the Technology Mission on Oilseeds and Pulses, the Special Foodgrains Production Programme, the National Water Policy, the Million Wells Scheme, the Watershed Development Programme for Restoration and Regeneration of Degraded Lands and the massive Rural Employment Generation Programme.

6. Drought is no longer viewed merely as a discrete event calling for emergency relief. India's current drought management strategy includes an early warning and monitoring system, emergency response mechanisms, a standby financial support arrangement (Calamity Relief Fund), preparedness plans (for crop production, employment generation, food security, drinking water, health care, nutrition and livestock preservation) and preventive measures which seek to increase integration of drought mitigation with development programmes.